

Who Was a Liberator?

“Beyond documenting the event of liberation, knowing something about the witnesses and liberators adds significance and depth to our understanding of the past.” – Dr. Theresa L. Ast

I. Debate over terminology

A. “Liberator” can only be applied to those present at the initial liberation of the camp

1. Front-line troops were first to encounter the camps
 - engaged with the enemy
 - literally opened the gates to inner prisoner compound
2. often prescribed by a narrow time limit to the hour
3. “Individuals not meeting these specific requirements who claim to have participated in a camp liberation are at times labeled fraud by other World War II veterans.”
4. results in sense of competition for recognition
 - [List of U.S. Army divisions](#) recognized by USHMM with the U.S. Army’s Center of Military History (24 Infantry Divisions, 10 Armored Divisions, 2 Airborne Divisions)
5. specific criteria set by USHMM and USACHM:
 - set time limit of 48 hours from point of first contact between American military unit and camp
 - deals with liberating unit only at division level

B. Credit belongs to entire United States Army

1. Front-line troops depended on an “immense support system”
2. “a modern army does not consist of solitary heroes, but functions based on team work and mutual support.”

II. Soviet Red Army

A. liberated camps on eastern front earlier in war (first to do so)

1. such camps had fewer prisoners due to evacuations in winter of 1944-1945 → severe overcrowding at camps liberated on western front

B. July 1944: Majdanek near Lublin, Poland

1. SS demolished camp to hide evidence

C. summer 1944: the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka killing centers

1. had been dismantled in 1943 after most of the Jews in the areas had been killed already

D. January 27, 1945: Auschwitz the largest killing center and concentration camp

1. most of the warehouses had been destroyed by retreating Germans
2. Soviet found personal belongings of victims
 - hundreds of thousands of men's suits
 - more than 800,000 women's outfits
 - more than 14,000 pounds of human hair

III. American Army

- A. April 11, 1945: Buchenwald and Dora-Mittelbau
- B. April 23, 1945: Flossenbürg
- D. April 29, 1945: Dachau
- E. May 1945: Mauthausen (last camp to be liberated by Allies)

IV. British Army

- A. April 15, 1945: Bergen-Belsen
- B. May 4, 1945: Neuengamme

(Source: Confronting the Holocaust: American Soldiers Enter Concentration Camps. Ast, Dr. Theresa. 2013.)

Dachau

Prisoner Count 1933-1945: exceeded 188,000

Death Toll January 1940 – May 1945: at least 28,000

“It is unlikely that the total number of victims who died in Dachau will ever be known.”

I. Established in March 1933

A. First regular concentration camp established by Nazi government

1. Officially described by Himmler (then police president of Munich but became key and senior Nazi official responsible for conceiving and overseeing implementation of the so-called Final Solution) as "the first concentration camp for political prisoners."

B. Located on grounds of abandoned munitions factory near northeastern town of Dachau (10 miles northwest of Munich)

II. Prisoners

A. used as forced laborers – forced labor via concentration camps was increasingly important during the war to production of German armaments

1. first used in operation of the camp (ie: construction projects)
2. built roads
3. gravel pits
- 4 drained marshes

B. 1933: held about 4, 800 prisoners

1. primarily consisted of:

- German Communists
- Social Democrats
- trade unionists
- other political opponents of Nazi regime

2. later grew to include

- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Roma
- homosexuals
- "asocials"
- repeat criminal offenders

3. early years included relatively few Jews

- belonged to one of the above groups
- convicted of violating Nuremberg Laws of 1935

C. November 10-11, 1938: number of Jewish prisoners grew with increased persecution (ie: aftermath of Kristallnacht)

1. more than 10,000 Jews interned after Kristallnacht

most of these men were released after a few weeks after proving they had made arrangements to emigrate from Germany

III. Camp complex and sub-camps

A. model camp

1. training center for SS concentration camp guards
2. organization and routine became model for all Nazi concentration camps

B. Early 1937: camp grounds grew to include large complex of buildings

1. constructed using prisoner labor
2. completed mid-August 1938
3. remained unchanged until 1945

C. 1942: crematorium constructed next to main camp

1. included old crematorium and new crematorium (Barrack X) with a gas chamber
 - “There is no credible evidence that the gas chamber in Barrack X was used to murder human beings.”
 - The selection at Dachau = sick or weak sent to Hartheim “euthanasia” killing center near Linz, Austria (several thousand Dachau prisoners were murdered here)
2. killing sites at Dachau = SS used firing range and gallows in the crematoria

D. summer and fall 1944: satellite camps established near armaments factories throughout southern Germany

1. more than 30 large subcamps
2. over 30,000 prisoners worked almost exclusively on armaments
3. thousands of prisoners were worked to death

IV. Liberation

A. April 26, 1945: American forces approached

1. 67,665 registered prisoners at Dachau and subcamps
 - More than half were in main camp

- 43,350 political prisoners
- 22,100 Jews

2. more than 7,000 prisoners (mostly Jews) forced on death march to Tegernsee (south)

C. April 28, 1945: train with approx. 40 railway cars arrived

1. had left Buchenwald on April 7
2. filled with 5,000 prisoners
3. 2,000 prisoners died en route

D. April 29, 1945: American forces arrived at Dachau (42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions and 20th Armored Division of US Army)

1. as they neared the camp, they found more than 30 railroad cars filled with bodies (2,310)

- 816 survivors from train were taken to barracks within camp

2. Found approx. 32, 999 prisoners at camp

E. early May 1945: American forces liberated prisoners who had been sent on death march

(Source: "Dachau." Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 June 2014. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005214>)

Buchenwald

Prisoner Count July 1937 – April 1945: over 250,000

Death Toll at least 56,000 males (11,000 were Jewish)

“Exact mortality figures for the Buchenwald site can only be estimated, as camp authorities never registered a significant number of the prisoners.”

I. Opened in July 1937

A. constructed in a wooded area in north slopes of Ettersberg

1. five miles north of Weimar in east-central Germany
2. Weimar = birthplace of 1919 Weimar Republic

II. Prisoners

A. initially only for male political prisoners

1. women not prisoners there until late 1943 or early 1944

B. 1938: aftermath of Kristallnacht sent 10,000 Jews

1. subjected to “extraordinarily cruel treatment upon arrival”
2. 255 died

C. grew to include:

- recidivist criminals
- Jehovah’s Witnesses
- Roma and Sinti
- German military deserters
- “asocials”
- D. later stages included:
 - POWs (including from U.S.)
 - resistance fighters
 - prominent former government official of German-occupied countries
 - foreign forces laborers

III. Camp complex and subcamps

A. Layout

1. main camp = northern part of the camp
2. prisoners confined in main camp
3. detention area (“the Bunker”) = entrance
4. SS guard barracks and administration compound = southern part of the camp

5. surrounded by electrified barbed-wire fence, watch towers, sentries with automatic machine guns

B. Killing

1. stables = SS often shot prisoners
2. crematorium = SS hanged prisoners
3. phenol injection = SS physicians or orderlies to prisoners unable to work
4. the selection at Buchwald = sick or weak sent to euthanasia facilities such as Bernburg

C. Medical experimentation (starting in 1941)

1. carried out by physicians and scientists
2. special barracks in northern part of main camp
3. aimed at:
 - testing efficacy of vaccines
 - treatments against contagious diseases such as typhus, typhoid, cholera, diphtheria
4. 1944: Dr. Carl Vaernet tried to “cure” homosexual inmates via hormonal transplants

D. Important source of forced labor

1. by Feb 1945 population expanded rapidly reaching 112,000
2. prisoners deployed to:
 - German Equipment Works (Deutsche-Ausrüstungs-Werke; DAW) which was owned and operated by SS
 - camp workshops
 - stone quarry
3. February 1942: Gustloff firm established a subcamp to support armaments works
4. March 1943: Gustloff firm opened a large munitions plant adjacent to camp
5. 1943: rail siding connected the camp with freight yards in Weimar → facilitated the shipment of war supplies

D. At least 88 subcamps from Düsseldorf in the Rhineland to the border with the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the east

1. prisoners deployed by SS authorities and firm executives from both private and state-owned companies
2. One of the largest concentration camps established within old German borders of 1937

IV. Liberation

A. January 1945: more than 10,000 prisoners from Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen arrived after death march

1. Soviet forces swept through Poland → Germans evacuated thousands of prisoners in areas under threat

B. early April 1945: US forces approach camp and Germans evacuate 28,000 prisoners

1. 1/3 died from exhaustion en route, shortly after arrival, or shot by SS
2. underground resistance at camp saved “many lives”
 - some members held key administrative posts at camp
 - obstructed and delayed evacuation

C. April 4, 1945: 4th Armored Division of U.S. Army liberated Ohrdruf (subcamp)

1. first camp liberated by U.S. troops

D. April 11, 1945

1. expecting liberation, prisoners stormed watchtowers
 - seized control of camp
2. later in afternoon, US forces entered Buchenwald (6th Armored Division)
 - reported finding 21,000 prisoners

E. April 12, 1945: 80th Infantry Division entered Buchenwald to provide relief to 6th Armored Division

1. went on to liberate Ebensee (subcamp of Mauthausen) May 4-5, 1945

(Source: “Buchenwald.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 June 2015. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005198>)